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THE STATESMANSHIP OF YUAN SHI KAI

BY WILLIAM ELLIOT GRIFFIS

IN China "man is a weed," said De Quincy. Even names swamp personality in being monosyllabic. We acknowledge gratitude to the Jesuits for Latinizing a few of them. Confucius and Mencius, at least, stand for realities. Thus the eel of memory, if not of science, may be held, for a moment, by the tail.

Yuan Shi Kai stands among the immortals, for his name is remembered. In 1884, when Li Hung Chang's personality was less slippery and more graspable to the Occidental consciousness than that associated with any other Chinese name, there emerged in Korea, then the storm center of Asiatic politics, a new planet in the system of which Li was the sun. So real a personage was this individual that even with pig-tail and in petticoats, he was borne to court in a palanquin, while the other foreign envoys had to walk in the mud. This was Yuan Shi Kai. With condescension and only from a raised dais, he received the visiting representatives of sovereigns and republics. Lofty was his air, impressive were his mien and bearing and high-handed were his actions. Then, all political parties in this "little outpost state" were either pro-Japanese or pro-Chinese.

Yuan's spectacular vigor in asserting the age-old influence of Korea's former suzerain, as superior to any and all scraps of paper, provoked the Korean revolutionists, who had tasted the new Japanese wine of progress, to a *coup d'etat*. Their rocket-like government fell like a stick, within twenty-four hours, its fall hastened by Chinese interference and an armed collision between the soldiery led by Yuan and the little Japanese legation guard. Yuan had snuffed out the candle of progress. But, do revolutions ever go backward? One of many similar incidents told of Yuan, at this

time, reveals his mental processes. He would not allow the American surgeon to amputate a soldier's arm, in order to save his life; for, "what good is a one-armed soldier?" he asked. One of his useless favorites, however, he pensioned.

In the bloody battle fought in the streets of Seoul, between five thousand Chinese and one hundred and twenty Japanese, four things were demonstrated: (1) the short life of any movement, even when called national, that did not have, as in the Japan of 1868, a century of previous intellectual preparation behind it; (2) the superb marksmanship of the Sendai deer-hunters, who wore the Mikado's uniform; (3) the excellence of American surgery; and (4) the fact that, apparently, Heaven is always on the side of the heaviest battalions, whether Napoleonic or Chinese.

Diplomacy, as represented by Li Hung Chang and the Marquis Ito, at Tientsin, patched up the international rent and the soldiers of both countries were withdrawn from Korea. In Japan the men of the growing party, not perhaps to be called "war," "jingo," or "irredenta," or "big" or "little" Nippon, but rather to be labeled "make-the-glory-of-Japan-shine-beyond-the-seas," politely sucked in their breath, and swallowed their pride, in order to digest it for future strength. Their real feelings and true answer, if these had been made directly to Li, are best expressed in the words of Charles Francis Adams to Earl Russell: "It is unnecessary to remind your lordship that this means war." In ten years Li was at Shimonoséki, begging for peace after defeat and pleading for limits to humiliation and indemnity.

Our preface is long, but Korea introduced Yuan to both China and the world. He never traveled further, in language or land, and his course in the peninsula was both prophecy and miniature of his whole career. On June 7, 1916—to use our older Western phrase—he died with his boots on and his spurs strapped. He was a military man from his youth up, without knowing or wanting to know what a real republic was, nor did he ever give welcome to new ideas, except as these were based on force, which he himself could manipulate.

Yuan was born in 1858, the year of China's war with France and England. The son of a concubine, he, in adult life, knew not what monogamy was. In youth and stalwart manhood, this apostle of the strenuous life was fond of guns

and horses and made spectacular use of all those physical phenomena that so charm the small boy and the jingo in every land. Of large but never subtle brain power, and almost destitute of intuition, his mental vigor was never shown in mastery of the classics, or in minute apprehension or appreciation of the texts of Kung Fu Tsé, or Wang Yang Ming. If the philosophy of the latter is summed up in the dictum that true knowledge means action and demands that clear perception should be followed by duty (*exitus acta probat*), then Yuan was a Chinese pragmatist, excelling even the Japanese revolutionists of 1868, who were past masters of this same philosophy, which, in their tongue, is named *Oyoméi*.

Yuan passed rapidly up the ladder of office, into power, by stepping, at every opportunity, on the rungs of action. Li Hung Chang was his teacher and model. Yuan's preparedness for statesmanship consisted chiefly in storing up the fixed ammunition of Chinese rhetoric, which was almost German in its thoroughness and abundance. To his death hour, no mandarin or even emperor could excel him in official orthodoxy, in pious phrases, or even in that voluble and public confession of sin and unworthiness, which is one of the curiosities of Oriental state papers. In form, but not in essence, Yuan never rose above his Korean record and policy.

When, after having made Tientsin a modern city, he sent to the writer his photograph and sign manual, his verbal message with these amounted to this: "No flattery, only justice." Perhaps, in his dying moment, his final word to the world might be the same. He never professed to be a scholar, a man of letters, or a statesman with ideals.

Was Yuan a Mirabeau, a Cromwell, a Bismarck? Millions think him a Benedict Arnold. Historic analogies must not be pressed. External resemblances count for little; while any profound or subtle analysis of motives, except in the acknowledged form of conjecture, is worthless. Whether Imperial Resident in Korea, City Governor, Tao-Tai, of either Chili or Shantung, head of the Foreign Office, advocate and protector of the old dynasty, President of the Republic, restorer of the State religion, High Priest in the Temple of Heaven, restorer of Confucianism, or quasi-Emperor, Yuan was the same man—the re-incarnation of the typical mandarinism of Old China, never of the spirit of the New. He, the man, was ever faithful, secondarily, to master, sovereign,

party, republic, or traditional Chinese ideas, but ever and always first to Yuan Shi Kai. With all his limitations, he believed in the China of his own mind—indestructible, un-sinking, eternal. In his view, the Central Empire would hold to unity, perpetuate its life, weather all storms, and return to primitive ideals, as surely as the compass after all aberrations would tremble to the pole; and this faith he held because such a China was, on the whole, best for Yuan Shi Kai. To keep secure as long as possible his harem and his herd, his flocks and his possessions, his enjoyments of body and mind, the two, Yuan and China, must need be inseparable.

Yet expose the reality as we may, who will wish to minimize the vast service of such a man to China? In purely local matters, with ages of experience behind them, the Chinese are as fit for a republic as are New Englanders. No imperial dynasty has lasted over three centuries, because the Chinese love freedom too well. There never was any permanent nobility in China, and in the ninth generation even the descendants of imperial princes become commoners. The Manchu dynasty followed in the way of all others, because its time was up. It had to go.

Yuan—called, because he had manipulated the call, to guide a republic—was a man steeped in traditions of force and craft. As unalterably minded as a mandarin of the old school, he could see no ideals, but only the material bases of things. Hence he selected from foreign importations only what would help his own notions of things. In the Republic, he was confronted with parliamentarians overweighted with theory. Moreover, the men in the North and in the South of China are, in mind, almost as two races. We must remember that it took the United States a century of struggle and four years of colossal, bloody war to fuse sectionalism and unite the nation. To conciliate or unify, Yuan knew not compromise, but only the method of the shooting squad. Of the modern world's forces, he utilized only those that had visibility, such as finance, army, navy, railways, hygiene, the medical art and efficiency in administration, and these he used well.

Yuan's statesmanship, such as it was, served as corduroy for the swamp and bridges for the rivers, which China must pass, on the long road to central strength—which, from azure-robing distance, seems so short and easy to the men of books and letters. Amid colossal obstacles, he restored the

financial credit of China and postponed that "break-up" which so many foreigners gleefully expected. He laid the foundations of a genuine army. He safeguarded, as far as he could, the country from aggression. His supreme idea for his country was freedom from alien conquest. The highest tribute to be paid to Yuan is this, that foreign Governments turned almost unanimously from trusting China to place their confidence in one man, Yuan.

In brief, while Yuan Shi Kai was the last man in China to satisfy, in his person and policy, either the unformulated cravings or the clearly seen ideals of the awakened Chinese nation, he was possibly the best one to serve as a stepping stone to higher things. That he saw the necessity of China's adopting the physical forces of the West, of modernizing her system of administration, of making herself strong to resist the ruthless inroads of foreign investors of "surplus capital," who were hand in glove with diplomatists, and that he restored the nation's financial credit, cannot be denied. That his modes of action were either frank, or noble, or commendable, cannot be affirmed.

There is hope for the Republic of China, not because, out of her communal civilization, China has yet produced a republican leader, in whom theory and experience balance, but because the Republic, in its babyhood, suffers from the accident of its birth out of due time. It lacked in intellectual ancestry and a pre-natal preparation. Its enlightened men of modern mind have been too sectional. Yet the elements of safeguarded freedom exist, and only leadership is needed.

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